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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000677

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TAGS: [ENRG](#) [EPET](#) [KCOR](#) [EIND](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: PRT TIKRIT: A BALANCING ACT: THE OPF AND 4TH IA IN  
BAYJI

REF: BAGHDAD 462

Classified By: Classified by Stephanie Miley, PRT Deputy Team Leader, f  
or reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This is a PRT Tikrit, Salah ad Din cable.

12. (C) SUMMARY. The Oil Protection Force at the Bayji oil refinery, normally overseen by the Ministry of Oil (MoO), is now nominally under the command of the 4th IA according to a January 29 directive by PM Maliki. In practice, however, the OPF largely operates independently of MoO control, heavily influenced by local sheikhs, politicians, and other interests. Al Maliki's edict, which also replaced the current refinery chief Abdel Khader with Ali Obeydi, could set the stage for a behind-the-scenes turf battle in Bayji between OPF and the 4th IA (represented by three Strategic Infrastructure Battalions, or SIBs, the 8th, 12th, and the 20th). The end result of the change is uncertain. On one hand, the presence of the SIBs potentially increases the possibility for increased illegal trafficking in refined fuel. However, this development may also offer the GOI a window of opportunity. An adroit policy on the ground which encourages a system of checks and balances between the rival groups could introduce an element of accountability in Bayji not previously seen. END SUMMARY.

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One Big Happy Family  
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13. (C) Tasked with providing internal and external security at the Bayji oil refinery, the Oil Protection Force appears to be heavily influenced by shadowy local leaders (sheikhs and politicians), who may receive favors in the form of fuel and employment opportunities for tribe members (reftel). In order to curtail the widespread oil smuggling at Bayji that creates severe refined fuel shortages throughout north-central Iraq, PM Al Maliki ordered LTG Aziz, the commander of the IA 4th Brigade (whose AO extends into several provinces), on January 29 to mount a military invasion of the Bayji refinery; taking command of OPF, eliminating corruption, and then ceding control to a revamped Ministry of Oil security force. Given thirty days to deal a substantial blow to the oil smuggling trade, Aziz deployed additional detachments from the 8th, 12th, and 20th Strategic Infrastructure Battalions (SIBs) to the refinery; elements from these units were already guarding the front and rear gates. Despite the fanfare, deployment of the SIBs to stop corruption at Bayji is not a magic bullet. SIB units are known to siphon fuel from pipelines as well as extort tanker drivers, and according to evidence acquired from refinery contacts, newly deployed units at the refinery may already be enjoying newfound opportunities for self-enrichment. (COMMENT: However, if coupled with a steady CF presence, rivalry between the OPF and the SIBs may encourage them to keep tabs on each other. Skillful manipulation of the situation by the GOI could significantly assist in the

elimination of the rampant oil smuggling at Bayji and simultaneously provide an immense boost to Iraq,s struggling economy by ensuring greater supplies of refined fuel to the general population. END COMMENT)

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A New Sheriff in Town  
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14. (C) There is no doubt that the arrival of SIB forces to Bayji has produced a number of positive changes. Nearly all tanker drivers told IPAO during interviews on February 7 that they perceive a dramatic increase in security in the immediate vicinity of the refinery (previously AIF would loiter outside the front and back gates, threatening and extorting tanker drivers). In addition, some of the SIB leaders, such as COL Yaseen, Commander of the 12th SIB, appear to enjoy a strong reputation as being above corruption among both local Iraqis (in and out of the refinery) and CF alike. On February 7, Yaseen told IPAO that he and his men saw the upcoming fight against corruption at Bayji as a struggle for the Sunni people.<sup>8</sup> According to Yaseen, if oil smuggling in Bayji is not ended soon, the Shia-dominated GOI and Ministry of Oil would close the refinery. He has embraced the responsibility for his unit to accomplish the anti-corruption mission in order to avoid that outcome.

15. (C) Conversely, refinery officials were almost unanimous in expressing skepticism at the idea that the SIBs would not engage in corruption, and predicted it would be on a far more massive scale than OPF corruption. Abdel Khader, Chief of Production, told IPAO on February 7 that &With OPF we know what to expect. A little fuel here, a jerry can there. The IA will use whole tankers to steal the fuel.<sup>8</sup> Khader also

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stated that he was aware of several fuel theft schemes involving the IA (NFI). (COMMENT: The views expressed by refinery officials should be weighed in consideration of the fact that many of them may be involved in or complicit with the OPF on oil smuggling ) and may also desire to maintain the status quo - so their concern may not be entirely altruistic. END COMMENT.)

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8They Won,t Be Happy8  
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16. (C) During an interview conducted on February 6, Nebhan Mehjoob, OPF Bayji District Manager, accused the IA of a laundry list of alleged offenses ) such as fuel theft and tanker driver extortion - committed by the 8th and 20th SIB at the refinery during the first week of February. (NOTE: Nebhan also provided photos to accompany his charges. END NOTE.) Nebhan and Sabah repeated the concerns expressed by other refinery officials; the SIBs have proven to be corrupt already, they have the potential to steal greater amounts of fuel. Both OPF managers conveyed to IPAO that they would closely monitor IA activities and continue to report any wrongdoing to CF. Nebhan and Sabah appeared to be ambivalent regarding the new director, Dr. Ali Obeydi (in office for only one week at the time of this writing); instead they focused their attention on the IA. However, more important to the long-term security situation at Bayji than the response by refinery management to the new situation may be the response by the local power players who have interests to protect there. This remains an unanswered question: when asked to predict the sheikhs, ) and their clients within the OPF - reactions to a possible IA clamp down on corruption, Nebhan simply stated enigmatically, &They won,t be happy.<sup>8</sup>

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Comment  
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¶17. (C) COMMENT. Deployment of the SIBs is not a panacea. Considering their prior overall record, it is dubious that alone they are capable of stopping fuel theft at Bayji. In the wild-west like atmosphere of the Bayji oil refinery, where a number of players are competing for power and influence, neither the SIBs nor new Director Dr. Obeydi are likely capable of terminating the entrenched oil smuggling trade alone, the best intentions of General Aziz and Colonel Yaseen notwithstanding. However, any measure of increased security in Bayji is a positive development. In addition, the OPF and the SIB,s suspicion of each other could be carefully nurtured into a system of checks and balances, ensuring a level of accountability at Bayji which has always been lacking. Coupled with an increased CF presence at the refinery, there now appears to be a window of opportunity ) given skillful leadership by the GOI - to effect positive change upon one phase of the fuel smuggling epidemic.

¶18. (C) The local leadership of the OPF appears to be grudgingly prepared to cooperate with the IA and Obeydi. Less certain is the reaction of the local sheikhs and politicians who appear to exert considerable influence at the facility (largely through indirect control of the OPF). Many of these players will probably wait to see how the situation develops in the near-term; however, if oil smuggling is actually reduced, a backlash by OPF and/or AIF elements in the form of retaliatory attacks and other forms of sabotage at the refinery is possible, even likely. The Bayji refinery ) probably due to its cash cow status for various players - is one of the few locations in Iraq which has largely been exempt from terrorist attack since 2003. This has the potential to change in 2007 if Al Maliki,s plan is ultimately successful. END COMMENT.

¶19. (U) PRT Tikrit thanks the soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 505th Paratroop Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division for their invaluable contributions and support that make this reporting possible.

¶10. (U) For additional reporting from PRT Tikrit, Salah ad Din, please see our SIPRNET reporting blog:  
<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Tikrit>.

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